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POPULAR BIBLE STUDY IN SCOTLAND.

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It is, perhaps, unnecessary to say that the Bible is still peculiarly dear to the mass of the Scottish people. Whatever decline there may be in national religion, whatever forces may be materializing their conception of human life, the body of the nation is still true to their fathers' love of the Bible. No one, of course, can tell to what extent it is neglected or can compare the Bible reading of today with that of a past generation—the most observant say that it is much less common than it was. But that does not prevent their saying, also, that the most effective portion of the people is feeding its soul on this one book. They read it, and they read it that they may know God. No story of Scottish life can exaggerate its influence upon Scottish character. For many a peasant woman and city artisan it is still the single and unapproachable means of culture.

But that reading is not what we shall speak of as the study of the Bible. It is not everyone that reads who studies, who has a clear and definite knowledge of either contents or meaning. In this sense, study is not a common thing anywhere or at any time, and of the Bible it may also be said that, while thousands read, and love to read, and read it with appreciation and profit, there are comparatively few that give their strength to know thoroughly what it means. And yet the comparatively few are many.

We can best describe the direction and results of popular Bible study by taking in view the common methods in vogue for furthering it.

And, first, *the Minister's Bible Class*. Every minister has felt the need of supplementing his pulpit teaching by what is more direct and individual; and no means could be more effective

than this gathering of young men and women on Sunday evening. The Bible class is, one might say, even popular in Scotland. Of course, its popularity and the worth of the teaching given at it will depend almost entirely on the power of the teacher—on his equipment and the amount of work he puts into it. Some men have their hearts in it, see the opportunity it gives of forming opinion and character, and read and prepare for it with their whole strength. The result is that the attendance will sometimes reach two hundred, or it may be even five hundred. In these classes the minds of the young are awakened; they have their interest in the Bible determined for life; and they look back long years after and tell how they owe their very souls to it. Of course, in rural parishes the classes must be small, but, none the less, the ministers of these parishes know that their best office-bearers have often been formed there; while city ministers as readily acknowledge that the very élite of their workers have been trained by their country brethren.

A great stimulus was given to this work some twenty years ago and more by Dr. Whyte, of Free St. George's, Edinburgh. It took the form of a scheme of studies and examinations now widely known as the "Welfare of Youth Scheme." Prizes and certificates of honor were offered to the successful candidates; books of study were prescribed, and centers of examination were appointed throughout the whole country—in the remotest parishes and islands, and sometimes even in the colonies. The scheme was launched in the Free Church of Scotland, but has been taken up by most of the other churches. Last year in the Free Church (where, naturally, it has been most cultivated) no fewer than 6,000 candidates sent in their names. And the candidates, it must be remembered, are but a small proportion of those who undertake the study. It would not be surprising to learn that as many as 50,000 young people were attending the classes; it has been stated as high as 70,000. In many a rural parish the chief educational interest among those who have left school is this study and this examination; in many a manse during the spring months the minister's leisure is spent in preparing his best pupils for it. And their success is all the

reward he seeks. In the parlor of farm house or farm laborer's cottage, or of tradesman or mechanic in town or village, the visitor will see adorning the wall the framed certificate of honor won by a son or daughter of the house, or perhaps by the husband or wife. Everyone will see that it is an immense service to a country to bring tens of thousands of its youth yearly into living contact with the Word of God and to make their knowledge of it definite enough for them to pass a searching examination with distinction.

Round this scheme has grown up quite a crop of aids to the study of the Bible—handbooks, text-books, primers. For the use of classes in the Church of Scotland (Established), there are the "Guild Text-books," edited by Professor Chanteris and Dr. McClymont, of which those dealing more strictly with Bible subjects are: *Our Lord's Teaching*, *The Old Testament and Its Contents*, *The New Testament and Its Writers*. These are small books of 140 or 150 pages, selling for sixpence; but they are excellent, written by most competent men, and have commanded a wide sale. Under the auspices of the Free Church, two series of books have appeared. The first are the "Handbooks for Bible Classes," edited by Professor Marcus Dods and Dr. Whyte, and intended for advanced students. Among them are English commentaries on many of the books of Scripture. Perhaps the best-known are Professor Davidson's *Epistle to the Hebrews*, and Dr. Stalker's *Life of Christ* and *Life of Paul*. Although some of them are of outstanding merit, none of them has ever been the work prescribed for the examination. For this much smaller and cheaper volumes have been prepared under the editorship of Professor S. D. F. Salmond, of Aberdeen, called "Bible Class Primers." The plan of this series is to retell the Scripture story, adding to the narrative the elucidation that has come through modern scholarship. Among them, from the Old Testament, there are the lives of Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon; the period of the Judges, the kings of Israel, kings of Judah, and the exile and restoration; from the New Testament, the life of Christ, the parables, the miracles, the lives of Paul, John, and Peter. On the whole, these small and cheap books

have been exceedingly well done. An objection, however, has been taken to them that they have tended to turn away the pupils' intellect from the text of Scripture. The thoroughness of the examination and their deep interest in it have led them to give their time and strength to mastering the primer. Often, under the influence of the teacher himself, sometimes in spite of him, they have set the Bible aside for the primer's version of it. This is, of course, unfortunate; for the best primer or text-book that can be written is not literature, and can never form an approximation to the penetrating religious power of Scripture. What is wanted is something that will exhibit Scripture in its beauty and strength; that will draw renewed attention to its words, its thought, its devotion. What the young need in their biblical study is that their memories become stored with the phrases and their thinking saturated by the biblical conception of the work of man and of God. A true teacher, who is himself full of it, could do this without any primer; and the primer that will help the unskilled teacher will be as a sympathetic friend and guide to all this.

The Sabbath Morning Fellowship Association.—Next to the Bible class, this is perhaps the most widely spread organization for Bible study. Its membership in most congregations consists only of young men, but young women are admitted now into many. The syllabus of study is generally prepared by the members themselves, and is often quite admirably done. The method of conducting the meeting is pretty much the same everywhere—devotional exercises; the reading of a paper by one of the members on the lesson of the day; remarks (not controversial) by a few of the older members present. Now, there can be no doubt of the wide and deep influence of this organization. Here young men learn to express their minds on religious subjects; to take part in religious conversation and in public devotion; to view their lives and the world from the standpoint of Christ. To those who take an active share in the work the benefit must be very great, and the training for further Christian work must be exceedingly valuable. Yet it must be confessed that to the majority it is somewhat dull, and it is dull merely because they are

left inactive. They are only listeners, and therefore their minds are not fully engaged.

There is no finer opportunity for the higher Bible study than is offered here. Is there any way of taking full advantage of it? It is clear that the interest of all can be awakened only by getting all to take a share in the work. At present the model which the association copies is that of the pulpit; the model which they should copy is that of a reading circle. Each would then do something, and doing is the secret of interest—even if the doing were nothing more than turning to the illustrative passages. Let the members contribute some little portion to the meeting, as the members of a Christian Endeavor society would, and there will be the success of the Christian Endeavor movement.

The educated laymen of the church who are interested in the Bible study of the people could render no nobler service than take this up. A chairman would be required, and without assuming any other function than that of a chairman, avoiding the plague of lecturing above all things, knowing when to put a question and the right kind of question to put—such a man would be the quickening of many a Sabbath Morning Fellowship association. If he were on the watch for the backward who have still something to say; if he had the tact to keep the conversation true to the theme (and he would speedily acquire it); if he had knowledge to correct gently any mistakes, there would be no resenting his lead.

At a certain stage in a young man's development, the best processes for a religious end are indirect. Teach him to think on and to admire whatsoever things are true, noble, lovely, praiseworthy. Such a leader could point to the beauties of Scripture poetry and story, to the strength and courage of the prophet's teaching, to the greatness of the hero or of the poet; he could deal with the ancient civilizations and religions, with the discoveries being made every year concerning them—every year would give him some new and startling story to tell. The inevitable result would be that the Bible would become a living book, more living than any other, and more worth the

reading, and with the reading there would come the voice of the Spirit of God awakening the spirit of many to life.

There is another reason why the S. M. F. A. should (in the opinion of the present writer) be secured for advanced Bible study, viz., that between this organization and the Sunday school the great majority of those interested in the study are already engaged—their leisure time is occupied in the preparation of work for these classes. Round these turns very much of the nation's Bible reading; parents, teachers, ministers, young men and women, are busy with them. Advanced study outside these can hardly be successful on any large scale. But the Bible Class, and, perhaps, even more a reformed Sabbath Morning Fellowship meeting, are the very field prepared and waiting. The Fellowship meeting has hardly been touched by the handbooks, text-books, and primers in existence. Nor are they the kind of book best suited for their needs. It is not the ordinary commentary, on the one hand, nor, on the other, any recasting of Scripture narrative, that will serve the purpose. For one man that has been won to the study of Shakespeare by the Cambridge Notes, or by Lamb's Tales, one hundred have been won by such appreciations as those of Coleridge or the Cowden Clarks. For the Bible, a guide to appreciation need not be an essay; but it must be as free and as varied as the talk of a teacher who loves both literature and God.

In considering popular Bible study in Scotland, it is impossible to omit one form it takes which tells upon the whole Christian population, viz., *expository preaching*. Preaching of this kind is very common—perhaps not so common as it once was, but still common enough to be a note of the Scottish pulpit. There cannot be many ministers in the land who have not tried it; there are many who have continued it throughout their ministry. The most famous Scottish preachers have been expositors, and some of the most widely read of their books have been courses of lectures. Not only so; the least pretentious of our country ministers are often among our finest scholars, and are giving the fruit of their patient study and wide reading to their people. And it is the people's desire that it should be so. They like

“lecturing,” for they like knowledge much more than “anecdotes” or “appeals.” They desire to know God’s Word that they may know God.

The most potent influence upon Bible study, for the pulpit as well as for the class and the home, during the present generation was the great controversy on the teaching of Professor W. Robertson Smith. It sent thousands to their Bibles with new interest and with new eyes. Those on the side of the new positions and those against them read alike with a desire to understand. Men and women in Highland glen and in city tenement went to the Bible, to learn, if they could, on which side the trouble lay. As a result, for some years there lasted an impulse among the more thoughtful to *study* the Bible, such as can only be equaled surely in great religious movements. And today, after so many years, there is an abiding interest among the people, not, perhaps, in the details of criticism (they are not equipped for that), but in the results. At the time of the controversy there was a fear that the issue would be negation and the decay of vital religion. There can be but few who entertain the fear now. There is certainly a new freedom in the handling of these problems in the pulpit. And when it is done by believing men, who are reverent not only towards the Word of God, but also towards the faith of their fellow-Christians, the common people—even the simplest-minded among them—will gladly hear of the investigations of scholars, if by any means they can come to a fuller knowledge of the mind of God.